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United States Joins the War in East Timor

In 1973 five US intelligence agents visited a small island near Australia to make maps. Posing as prospective investors they hired a young journalist to travel with them for several weeks as a photographer. As they flew over the lush countryside and circumscribed the coastline in a rented airplane, he took thousands of photos of the mountainous terrain.

The island they visited was East Timor, then a Portuguese colony. The young photographer was Jose Ramos-Horta, now a leader of East Timor's liberation movement. The five agents turned out to be a scouting mission for US troops who have now joined Indonesian occupying forces.

Indonesia invaded East Timor on December 7, 1975, only nine days after FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for the Independence of East Timor) declared independence from Portugal. Only a year before, Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik had pledged Indonesia would respect East Timor's right to self-determination.

US forces joined the Indonesian army on the eve of Indonesian dictator Suharto's July 1978 visit to East Timor which was intended to demonstrate uncontested Indonesian control of the island. But Suharto's first visit to East Timor lasted less than 24 hours and he went only to the capital city of Dili and to a border town from which the press was barred.

US military advisors (FRETILIN claims from the CIA) and pilots participated in two battles close to Dili in early 1978 according to Alarico Fernandes, Minister of Information and National Security of the Democratic Republic of East Timor (DRET). In June 1978 Fernandes reported that two American military advisors had arrived in Dili in December 1977. Fernandes estimated that more than ten Americans were fighting in East Timor by June, and he charged that American pilots were flying OV-10 Bronco bombing missions.

US support goes much further. President Gerald Ford visited Indonesia the day before its

The Bronco "workhorse".

Thumbnail Sketch of East Timor

East Timor's tropical climate is the basis for its agricultural economy. The Portuguese first came to Timor in the early sixteenth century in search of its famed sandalwood. They later introduced coffee which the peasants still grow in the mountains. Between 1968 and 1972 coffee accounted for almost 90% of East Timor's exports; one third goes to the US.

When the Dutch arrived in the East Indies, they began to push out the weaker Portuguese. After centuries of war, the 1904 Portuguese-Dutch treaty defined the present boundaries between Dutch West Timor, now part of Indonesia, and Portuguese East Timor, now the Democratic Republic of East Timor.

Under Portuguese rule the death rate for children under five years of age was 40%. The DRET government estimates the population at about one million of whom 95% are illiterate.

invasion of East Timor began. As soon as he came to power, Jimmy Carter increased US military aid to Indonesia in March 1977. More recently Carter authorized the sale of F-5 jets to the Suharto regime. And during his May 1978 visit to Indonesia, US Vice President Walter Mondale announced the sale of a squadron of A-4 counterinsurgency ground attack bombers. The sixteen bombers were sold at the bargain basement price of $3 million, well below their normal price and well below the $7 million limit which requires congressional approval.

Only three years after the end of the long Indochina war, Americans may wonder what the US is up to in little-known, far-away East Timor. One person knows only too well: the young photographer, now FRETILIN's UN representative, Jose Ramos-Horta.

Horta told LSM that the US government considers an independent East Timor under FRETILIN leadership totally unacceptable because of the island's strategic location near Australia, Indonesia, and their waterways. The channel just north of East Timor is the deepest, safest route for US nuclear submarines traveling between Guam and the US base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Giant oil tankers must also pass by East Timor on their way to Japan.

Indonesia claims East Timor would get Soviet facilities under FRETILIN. Horta explained that the Front's principles of nonalignment and sovereignty preclude such a step. Nonetheless, he told LSM that the US government has stated that a friendly anti-communist government in control of East Timor is the best guarantee of US interests.

FRETILIN believes the US is worried and displeased about Indonesia's handling of East Timor whose resistance shows that Indonesia cannot be relied on as a regional power. As Horta expressed it: "If Indonesia cannot cope with tiny East Timor, how can they cope with the entire region?"